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Birthday

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## Birthday

We all sat around fussing, and fussing at each other's fussing; letting coffee grow cold and then making fresh coffee and then leaving that, too. A birthday cake was resting on the heavy oak table which sat in the middle of the oversized room. I knew that we were going to have to start the birthday dinner pretty soon, with or without Imani. Ernie was, despite a house full of people, and for the first time that I could remember, lying down on the plush double bed she and her daughter, Iree, shared. Iree had braided Ernie's loose gray hair into short squared-off braids. Ernie is from one of those Watusi tribes or something because she's so long and thin, but that evening, she looked kind of shriveled and showed all of her seventy and then some years. Her loom was empty, no cloth hanging from its harnesses, and no thread winding through the shuttles. "She got to do this one without me," Ernie had resolutely said and then lay down with her back to all of us.

The house only had one room besides the bathroom and the room we were in. That was Imani's room which sat off to the south side and was always full of sun, but didn't have much furniture, except for one oversized chest with a round mirror in the middle that Imani almost always seemed to cover with one of Ernestine's cloths, and a thin flat mattress laying in the corner. The room that we were in was the size of some people's whole house. It had a kitchen to one side and a bed and loom in the ell foot on the far side next to Imani's door and a shiny oak table that could sit eight people real comfortable and twelve with a bit of squeeze.

Al, as always, was sitting up stiff at the table. Al and me, we've been together over twenty-five years now but he's got that chocolate "good black don't crack" skin and seems like he's been able to hold

back the years more than any of us. Mico, his given name is Jeremiah, but we all call him Mico, was right across the way lounging in the overstuffed dark green sofa, looking and acting all salt and pepper, cantankerous as ever. Iree would perch on a chair, then stand up and pace and perch again. She's got these dark brown eyes that sit out from her head kind of bulb-like and make you want to turn away when she aims them at you. Well not me, I'm used to it, but lots a folks say those eyes give them the creeps. I find her pretty, too thin like Ernie, her adopted mama, was at that age. About once an hour she'd go to the door and say, more to herself than any of us, "It's so warm and nice, just perfect for today. I guess I'll walk around outside for a little."

Most times she didn't go outside. She'd start towards the door and then seem to forget where she was going and turn right around and sit back down. Now though, she was resting on the end of her mother's bed rubbing Ernie's feet and looking hard into the woman's smoke grey sightless eyes. Ernestine is and isn't Iree's mother. Iree was daughter of Ernie's then best friend Sibyl, who died when Iree was about four years old. Her brain just exploded, not the whole brain but, you know, some kind of cyst that burst inside and bled her to death. Iree was there when it happened, some say that's what made her so strange, marked her having to show her mother through the door to the next journey. Anyway, Ernie who's been raising or helping to raise somebody's children, her mama's, her brother, Jeremiah's, even mine, since she was maybe thirteen years old, just naturally took Iree in with no authority but her own, "I know what's best for this child. She's a special one."

Good thing she did too because something happened in the birthing time of Iree and she's got epilepsy, falls out anywhere and sometimes stays in a coma for three, four days. Didn't show up bad till after the mother died, but then she'd get to falling out and foaming at the mouth. Scares me, but Ernie acts like it's just ordinary, like some people having hay fever or getting the flu every winter.

Imani had disappeared two days before her seventeenth birthday. We were there to bring her back and see her safely home in the light of a moon which hung pale and puny from the dark, clear, northern sky. As the night wore on, one by one, we began to call her back.

Iree moved closer to us and was now sitting as still as I ever saw her sit, balanced on the edge of the couch talking softly, about how Imani was so reliable, sure to always turn up at the bottom of a long hill or opening the front door before Iree's feet even touched the bottom step, bursting on her mother, smothering her with laughter and chatter and hugs. Al went on for what seemed to be the ten hundred

thousandth time about how he'd been spooked by her eyes from the first day he'd seen them stare back at him, too clear and probing for any nine-day-old baby, and how it was just like her to do something like this on her birthday. Mico retold his story about the first domino game that Imani won, beating Jonah in only three rounds, and how Jonah kept banging his hands on the table claiming that somebody must have played bogus 'cause "couldn't no seven-year-old child, especially a girl-child, possibly win no bones against me without cheating or outside assistance." So she had to do it two more times that night, just to shush him up. And me, well I remembered helping her come in, kind of holding the door open for her, if you will.

It was an accident, my being there that night, seventeen long and all too short years before; one of those pre-arranged accidents of fate that makes you climb a longer and steeper hill than you thought you were ready for, and sometimes ends up taking you clear across the planet. I didn't look too much different then than I do now, of course there's more grey to me, but I've got baby grands now, you'd expect more grey. But I think I've held together pretty good, that's what Al says anyway, says I'm still a stallion to him. Course Jeremiah started to call me the old grey mare when he heard Al talking soft to me one day. That's the only time I can remember ever seeing Al ready to fight. Al just doesn't think its something you supposed to do, fight I mean, after you cross fifty. He says he's aiming to reach at least one hundred and doesn't need to get his blood pressure up. I've got problems with blood pressure myself, too much salt, I love my salt and red pepper sauce. Then, I hadn't stopped straightening my hair yet, spent hours keeping it just so, now I wear it loose and like a crown. In fact, that's what Imani calls it, my silver crown. She says the older I get the richer I get. I like that, she's such a sweet girl, always has a good word to say. Then though, I kept it straight and pulled back in a bun or long french roll. Anyway I remembered that night. There I was sitting with Ernestine and Iree and Jeremiah when suddenly Iree gives out this shudder and whistles a long thin stream of air. It was then that I had realized that while we were sitting pushing around tiles with limited conviction or conversation, Iree had been measuring her breaths and getting ready to push out that baby, close to two months early.

Ernie was tying off the ends of the baby blanket she had finished weaving the day before. It was a white blanket with soft yellow roses at the ends, with short yellow and white tassels. She sat at the loom calling encouragement and ridicule to each of us, on each pull of the bones, asking us to shout out the dots so she could see the layout in her mind. Mico was teasing her, laughing long and pulling on his beer,

sputtering. "Old lady you couldn't play dominoes when you were sighted, what makes you think you can lay a hand to them now, or should I say a mouth?"

"Mico, I was just being nice to you because you were so much younger and such a sorry loser. And you know what, old man, after all these years you are even more younger than me and still a sorry loser."

"You can tell those lies, but we all know the difference between the bull and the bull . . ."

"Shush your mouth," Ernie laughed, cutting him off and then, it seemed to me, at least at first, that everyone was laughing. But now, remembering back, Iree was just tight smiling and holding her laughter, blowing it out softly like a bell.

So it was and wasn't a surprise when it all started happening. That's how things always are at the Moores'. Somehow, more than anywhere else, you always seem to know what's going to happen right the instant before it happens, even though, likely as not, whatever does happen is going to be very different from anything you ever saw or did before.

I remember when I first met them and was so surprised that Ernestine could weave colors and patterns, what with her being blind and all. I mean just pick out the colors and then thread that loom by feeling out the shades. She wasn't too good with pastels, which Ernie would point out, if you mentioned that was a baby blue and not a lime green, "Ain't a real color anyway, just a liar trying to steal some spirit."

But that feeling out colors without eyes was nothing special. I mean that's about as common as a pot of beans for the kind of things that go on around that family. This all happened years ago, when Mico and I were already long, long past the special touching part of our friendship. For just over two years, we had been like hothouse air, thick of heat and spores, and orchid fragrant but never a real breeze. Actually it wasn't so horrible for us, just too stuffy for Mico and me and our unbending ways. I mean, Mico wasn't much worse a husband for me than I was wife to him. That made it kinda natural when we finally just moved apart and taught each other how to be friends. Yeah, it's stood some tests, but we've stayed friends up through my current husband Al, three children, a set of twin grandbaby boys, from my daughter, Fannie, and a stillborn grandbaby girl out of Garvey's second wife, who's scared now and won't try again, foolish child. Yeah, we always managed to hold onto that thread, so it made sense to me when I realized what was happening right then and there, and knew, like I know when to pull a corn bread out the oven, or pick a blackberry right before the juice bursts, I knew there wasn't going to be any

doctor. No, just us three bringing a baby, who was in way too much of a hurry, into this world.

It was alright somehow. I mean I knew it would work out. Of course, Al, every time he thinks about that day, just recalls me telling him why I was gone all night and calls some more, "Thanks to god for that little baby not dying." Ernie always laughs, says if he'd figure out how to match his faith to his book learning he might just get it.

Always telling him, "Al, one and one is going to be two no matter how many books you have or haven't read. When it turns into three, why it just ain't one and one no more, any way you count it."

Anyway, there we were relaxing around the table and Iree lets out this whistle and Ernie raises up off the loom bench and turns full circle, "It's time, Zulie, help me make the bed right."

My name's Zelma, but Iree never liked it so she always called me Zulie, and like everything in that house, from the smell, to the songs they sing, it stuck to my skin and my heart.

So I pulled back the bedcovers and put up some pillows so Iree could lean back. I don't think she did much more then perch on the bed's corner or sit squatting on the floor laying her head on the thick side of the mattress much of the night. I was terrified for the first few minutes, that she would have one of her epileptic fits, until I realized that's why I was there. Not to see for Ernie, Mico could do that, but to keep Iree in the room, here with the baby pressing through her wide-hip middle. I was supposed to hold on to her mind, to make it ride with mine, to not let it pull away and dive into another time, a different world. I was never so scared before or since as the moment I realized my task, and then Mico, he just comes behind me where I'm standing holding on to a corner of the bedspread with my mouth all slack and he puts his hand in the arch of my back real soft and whispers "Glad you're here, Zulie," and then he stands back rearranging the bassinet which he had fixed and painted in the last week. He laid the new blanket across the pale ivory sheets.

I didn't know exactly what to do so I just sat down on the bed myself grabbing Iree and pulling her next to me, and then I started to talking about my first time.

"I wasn't early like you child, oh no. That Garvey didn't want to take his place on this side of the mountain at all. I tell you if he coulda stayed in there for another few years I swear I do believe he would have."

Iree was looking in my eyes and smiling and I felt her hands trembling. She looked at me real hard and was moving her mouth but nothing was coming out, then I almost jumped out of my skin. I felt her

pains coming right up from my inside. I mean suddenly, all of gravity was just pressing out from between my legs, and my back was sore, and the wave was about to knock me over, when I just started to breathe and never stopped talking. Course that's what Ernie likes and don't like about me, keeping a conversation when I want to.

"Yes girl, he didn't want to rush in so like yours there. I think we got us a girl baby, what you say Ree, I can tell, got us a girl. Now you just breathe here with me, you just don't let go of my hands, and let's just swallow us some air and feed it to that baby."

Iree, she just didn't take her eyes off of me, and as her breath released I felt the pain roll off of me too. Then I hear Ernie close at my ear. "Don't take it all through you, Zulie, she'll give it to you to carry and leave. You gotta hold her here, not sail with her."

I raised my voice then; I was so scared. I swear I wanted to pee so hard you'd of thought the baby was pressing on my pelvis. Now, I already had my four babies. I was pregnant seven times. Lost two, couldn't let one come to the planet, had three live and pushed out one stone dead. I was too old to have another one, even by proxy. So I just grabbed all of my me I could find and raised my voice up. It was so high and thin I swear I thought Iree was holding my throat closed.

"Ree, Ree you got to feel the opening to let the baby out. You got to feel it. See the hole getting wider and just pulling back. Now I'm getting up . . ." By then I was screaming at her, "And you're walking with me across the room, and you gonna tell me what you see inside this room and not go nowhere else!"

Iree started laughing. I couldn't believe it.

"Zulie you about crazy. Why are you yelling in that silly voice. Where do you think I'm gonna go? If you want to walk, we'll walk. Zulie how come Garvey didn't want to get born?"

"I didn't say he didn't want to, I just said he wasn't in no big hurry. Boy ain't never hurried, won't hurry, can't hurry, can't even spell hurry. Hold on now Iree here we go again."

This time I only got a piece of the contraction. Iree pulled my face close to hers and her eyes split way back to my brain and for a minute I could have sworn that I was in a cool breeze outside the house, but the house was gone and all that was there was some dry grass and a big oak tree. There was Iree pregnant, and the baby, you could almost see it pressed sideways, pushing wrong to get out. Iree was panting and I was so glad to be outside with the little crisp in the air and the smell of the fire's smoke drifting around the chimney. Then I realized what had happened and I grabbed myself and pushed her out of my face.

"Iree we walking in here and you just tell that baby to turn itself right."

Ernie helped me walk Iree around the crowded room about three or four times. Then she says "Which way was the head facing Zulie?"

I told her it was kind of twisted to the right, and "don't ask me how I know but the cord is over its face and will pull wrong." Then Ernie got me to help Iree sit down and she slipped off all her daughter's clothes and then had her to lay flat on the bed. Then she started to rubbing her back and had me to hold Iree's shoulders still while she, calm as can be, starts rubbing Iree's too small womb and running her long fingers up and down the length of Iree's belly.

Now this all took, seemed like hours, but since there was nothing but the baby coming too early, and me and Iree's eyes, and Mico putting wood on the fire, well, time didn't have a hold on us. Iree and me were just breathing with the contractions and she's trying to pull me in with her and take her pains for her, and I'm trying to chatter on about having babies, and Ernie is just running lines across the belly and humming.

"Come on pretty girl, swim around. You gonna rush in, you better come in straight."

"Now C.J., she waited her time," I was going on trying to keep Iree occupied while Ernestine did her work. "But when the due date came, and I was as surprised as anyone that I called it right on the money, she came like a hailstorm. I mean just tore apart my insides rushing down the canal like so the doctor didn't even believe I was open enough. Good thing too, because he didn't have time to slice me up; just had to back up and catch my bright red screaming girl. Of course I didn't tear, honey, cause my body knew how to make room. You're not going to tear either."

Then I remember Ernie just easing away from the bed and me watching Iree's belly until I saw that the baby had adjusted and the head was dropping straight down into Iree's groin. I know what you're thinking, but I'm willing to swear I saw it, on any book or statue you choose to believe to be so holy that it can't hold lies.

So me, I mean I don't take much of a breath on that one, because I feel Iree's insides pulling back and see her about to run. The pains were coming harder and longer, deeper.

"This time Ree, Ree stay here, ride on the opening. Just pull in your breath and when you blow it out make the circle wider."

She tried again to pull my eyes inside her brain and let her travel away from the birth, but I wouldn't let her. I held her hands tight like I



used to do C.J. when I took her downtown, crowded store shopping. I breathed her in and held her till she snatched back her hands.

"Zulie, you're going to break my fingers. I'm not going anywhere. I haven't left this room all night, you the one who's flying." And then she turned to Ernie and plaintively whined,

"Mama."

Ernie smiled, "Zulie gonna get you through, baby."

So the rest of the night Iree and me, we walked and sat and lay together. And I felt every contraction just before it started to swell, and she sent me bouncing around the house, rolling down the hill, but she stayed in her now time. When it came time for Imani to come out, why Iree rose up off the bed where she'd been laying, naked as you please, and walked outside into the night. I grabbed one of Ernie's cloths from a hook on the wall and ran after her. I threw it over her shoulders as she moved down the porch stairs. It was a little bit cloudy, but clear and crisp. Mico came out laughing to cover his worry.

"That's one crazy child, that's all I got to say. Iree got alla my heart, but she is one crazy child."

Ernie came out and stood with us mumbling under her breath, "Hush old man. You never didn't understand nothing. It's fine to bring a baby out in the night air. Too much light in that house anyway."

We watched Iree kneeling underneath that old oak and start to digging a hole with her bare hands pursing her mouth and whistling each time her hands filled with soil. The shawl slid off her shoulders and swirled around her a pile of reds and oranges that blended with the drying fall leaves. I went to stop her digging and bring her back inside, but Ernie reached an arm out to my shoulder and held me on the porch. Then Ernie walked down the steps and laid a sheet out on the ground. Iree came over without making a noise. Then Mico came and propped her up on one side and I took the other side. She squatted against us and pushed and blew and blew and pushed and didn't make even a whine until all of a sudden this scream swirled up from her middle and her mouth dropped open and she arched back her head and howled until the leaves on the trees shook and my ears liked to fill with the blood of her cry. As she howled this tiny screaming baby slid into Ernie's waiting hands. Iree had that baby, less than five pounds, pale and curly-haired and opened eyes. Imani, why she hardly took a moment for crying a welcome to her new world before she settled on Iree and started to suckle that breast. Then when the baby was all the way situated and the cord was cut, Iree, she just wrapped that baby in her mama's shawl and scooped up the afterbirth with her free hand and pushed it into that hole she had dug. After that

she walked back into the house and passed out while little Imani just cuddled up close to her mama and looked all around, looking like she already had a house full of stories to tell. Yes, that was one long and scary wonderful night.

So of course I was there, sitting with the others around that big oak table, feeding people like always, and remembering the years before, remembering that itty-bitty baby that you could almost hold in one hand, just looking at me and making a smile. Yes, I sat as calm as I knew how and pretended not to watch the door, waiting for it to open, so I could hold tight onto my godchild and know that everything was going to be alright.